

# “A Symphony of Prayer”

## I Corinthians 1:10-18

[www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+1:10-18](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+1:10-18)

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### **One Family United by Christ!**

There is a vision of Christ’s Church given by the Apostle Paul in this letter to the Corinthian church. Christ’s church is to be a symphony of prayer singing God’s harmonious song.

- Christ is the focus of this gathering of people.
- The saving work of God in Christ is the theme of this prayer song.
- This community of God’s children is different in background, heritage, race, gender, education, and gifts.
- God, the Master Conductor, will gather all these diverse people into one harmonious community.

The vision of Christ’s church is a compelling dream of a people so in love with God that they are growing to be more and more like Jesus Christ. John B. Gardener, a schoolteacher, wrote this as a hymn for Methodist missions in South Africa. (“Christ Enough,” quoted in *An African Prayer Book* [New York: Doubleday, 1995,] 84.) The hymn captures the vision of the harmonious community of prayer growing into Christ-likeness.

*Christ enough to break all barriers;*

*Christ enough in peace, in strife;*

*Christ enough to build our nation;*

*Christ enough for death, for life;*

*Christ enough for old and lonely;*

*Christ enough for those who fall;*

*Christ enough to save the sin-sick;*

*Christ enough for one; for all!*

Mitch Finley writes in his book, *Whispers of Love*, these poetic thoughts on Christ’s harmonious community called the church.

*The Christian doctrine  
of the communion of saints  
is simple, really.*

*All it says is  
that once you buy the farm  
you still live on the farm.*

*All it says is  
that those who have gone before us  
are still with us.*

*All it says is  
that past generations  
still count  
and must be taken into account.  
in other words,  
we’re all in this together.*

*All of us.*

As cited in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*  
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 478.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred World War II Christian theologian wrote of this harmonious family of prayer in a short book about the underground seminary he helped to create during the height of the Nazi war power. Bonhoeffer writes, *“I have community with others, and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and His work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.”* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1954], 25-26)

The poets and theologians write about something you have perhaps experienced. The vision is of a community of God’s people who are focused upon worship, committed to following Jesus Christ, and willing to welcome all people. There is probably a moment in time when you have experienced the reality of God’s vision. You gathered with a group of people and all the differences in belief, background, body type, education, and economic status became a part of a harmony that brought about a rich unity of love. There are times in Lifegroups when a person shares their heart, the group gathers around and lays hands upon that person and prays with one heart and mind. At that moment the vision of Christ’s church is realized. At that time the harmonious symphony of prayer is played in the hearts and minds of the participants. This vision is certainly alive for some of us when we gather for Good Friday Worship with Hartford Memorial Baptist Church. God’s vision for all people is alive, vibrant, and real today as it was for Paul and the Corinthian church!

### **What’s Happening In Corinth?**

But, you ask, what is happening in Corinth to God’s vision? In this passage of scripture there seems to be division and conflict. The Corinthian church is broken into little interest groups that are self-righteously claiming to be better than each other. What has happened to God’s vision in Corinth?

Quite simply let us just say that humanity struck once again. I suggested that the human aggressive instinct is underneath race prejudice. Let me also share that this attitude of needing to be better than someone else also grows from the basic human aggressive motivator. The Corinthian’s want to be aligned with a winner! They want to be in the right camp. They want to be identified as God’s real people.

The division in Corinth grows directly out of this basic aggressive instinct to be better than someone else. All of us know this basic instinct! This kind of activity has been going on in human society since the beginning of time. The first brothers, Cain and Able, struggled with this part of their humanity.

Even our parents in the faith, the Jewish people, struggle with this human tendency to divide. A young Rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue’s 90-year-old founder. He met with the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. “So tell me,” he pleaded “was the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?” “No,” answered the old rabbi. “Ah,” responded the younger man, “then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?” “No,” answered the old rabbi. “Well,” the young rabbi responded, “what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream.” “Ah,” said the old man, “that was the tradition.” (Barbara Lemmel, “Makeshift Communities,” Christian Century. Jan.6-13, 1999, p.15)

### **What Can We Learn from Scripture about church life?**

If Scripture, psychology, and human history all affirm that division making and conflict are inevitable in a gathering of human beings, even in a church, what can we learn to help us grown through the conflict? The Apostle Paul teaches us a lot in response to this question. Let’s list our learnings.

*We can learn the primary importance of keeping the focus upon Christ Jesus.*

The Apostle Paul asks a sarcastic question, “Is Christ divided up?” He then urges us to keep our focus upon Christ our Lord. Christ is the one who opened heaven for us. Christ is the one who will guide and direct us in the midst of even the most difficult conflict. The question for each of us is not: “What can I get out of this situation?” Rather, the question is: “How can I honor Christ with my life and my choices?” The primary loyalty is not to a teacher, mentor, friend, or even family member. The church and each member are to be ultimately loyal to Christ Jesus.

*We can learn to anticipate conflict.*

This insight is so clear as to make it difficult to see. Conflict among families is normal. Sibling rivalry happens even into our eighties. Conflict will happen in a church family. We can expect it. We can also learn how to deal with it so that the conflict becomes a means to a stronger bond of love between each party in the conflict.

In **Ephesians 4:25-26**, ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ephesians+4:25-26](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ephesians+4:25-26)) Paul writes again about this issue. There he urges followers of Jesus to deal with their anger before the sun goes down. Anger is expected. The morality of our lives comes into question when we choose how we will deal with our anger. We are urged to deal with our anger immediately! Don't let it fester. Don't let it ripen into hate. Don't allow your mind to create scenario after scenario about how bad the person is with whom you have your conflict. Paul warns, deal with your anger or expect the Evil One to use it to harm you and those you love.

*We learn to stay connected in the conflict.*

Even though the Corinthian church is divided among their loyalty to a teacher and his/her doctrine, they are not leaving. They are not running away. They are staying and dealing as best they can with their brothers and sisters. Seeking to honor Christ, they are struggling to find a way through. They are committed to staying together until the Holy Spirit can work among them and help them grow peace.

*We learn to accept Jesus' Matthew 18: 15-17* ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+18:15-17](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+18:15-17)) *teaching.*

If we will stay connected, even in the midst of anger, then we need to learn what to do so that we can indeed honor Jesus Christ. The best teacher about this is Jesus himself. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus gives us a very clear directive as to how to deal with our anger with each other.

- 1. Prayerfully and humbly talk with each other first.** Do not talk about the person! Do not pull away and have nothing else to do with the person. Prayerfully and humbly listen and share with the person with whom you are angry. Most conflict can be resolved right here, if we would just be willing to trust the Holy Spirit and follow Jesus. But, if the conflict cannot be resolved between the two of you, Jesus offers a next step.
- 2. Prayerfully and humbly have a trusted friend** be with you to seek to sort out the problem. It is true that sometimes we cannot get beyond our own hurt and our own ego needs. There are times we need a trusted, objective third party who can help us hear what the other person is saying. Most conflict can be resolved by completing this step. However, there are odd and unusual circumstances that sometime cannot be solved this way. Jesus anticipates this reality and provides for us another step.
- 3. Prayerfully and humbly ask the church to help.** In this context, the church is not a large several hundred or thousand member organization. The church is the small group of dedicated people who are seeking to live together following Christ. In our church, this step would be to share the conflict with a Lifegroup, the Diaconate, a small group of trusted brothers and sisters. It is true that the concerted prayers of a group of people can be effective. More people can sometimes hear a way out of the conflict that is not possible for just the participants. But, what if this cannot help either? What does Jesus say?
- 4. Prayerfully and humbly, Jesus says, start the process over again.** Agree to disagree between each other and the church and then let God's Spirit lead you to deeper process of prayerful healing.

In rare cases we are called to share the grief of leaving in such a way that we can still love the person even though we cannot accept their actions.

Jesus' process is one we are called to implement if we are faithful followers of Christ. Just because we are afraid is not an excuse. Just because we feel inadequate is not an excuse. As brothers and sisters we are called by God to take each other so seriously that we will not jump from conflict to stage four. Paul calls the Corinthian church and each of us to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ in all things, and especially in our anger.

***We learn to become more like Jesus.***

This particular passage of scripture is not the only place Paul deals with this issue of conflict. In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul shares the vision of a people committed to being like Jesus. Knowing our human propensity to aggression and conflict, Paul says something amazing! Listen to him as he speaks to you.

***“Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new. God has done it all! God sent Christ to make peace between God and us, and God has given us the work of making peace between God and others. What we mean is that God was in Christ offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world. And God has given us the work of sharing God’s message about peace.” (II Corinthians 5:17-19) ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ii+corinthians+5:17-19](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ii+corinthians+5:17-19))***

This vision of a Christ-like people living together in such a way that God’s peace can grow among them is a vision that can be lived out in the here and now. These are not just ancient words. The power of God is behind these words if we choose to let them live within us.

In Rwanda and Burundi over 800,000 people were killed in a genocidal rage between two tribes of people. Many Christians died. Many Christians participated in the killing. Now that peace is established in the land, people are seeking to sort out their anger and grief. People in the same village, some in the same church know that each killed the others family members. How do you find peace and forgiveness in such a place? The people are following Jesus’ directive. They are coming together for prayer and seeking the Holy Spirit’s power to come among them. In one reconciliation conference a young man from Burundi shared on the first day that he was struggling with hate in his heart. He said, “My brother was killed in the genocide. I know who killed him. I see him around the village. It is all I can do to keep from revenging.” In response to the last day of the prayer filled conference this young Burundi man said, “I want to go back...No, I am eager to go back home, and find that man who killed my brother. I want to tell him that it is over, that I forgive him.” (Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. “Healing the Broken Heart” in *The Living Pulpit*, Oct.-Dec., 1998, p.12) If the Holy Spirit can heal the hurt of this wounded brother, then we can trust the Spirit to work in our lives and bring about forgiveness and peace.

If God’s vision of a community of people who are dedicated to worshipping God, following Jesus, and welcoming all people is to be a reality. Then we will all need to dedicate ourselves to dealing with the inevitable conflict asking that very popular question, “What would Jesus do?” Then, do what Jesus directs!

## **LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS**

**For Sunday, January 23, 2011’s Sermon**

**Foundational Scripture: I Corinthians 1: 10-18**

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+1:10-18](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+1:10-18))

**Featured Scripture Reflection:** “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” I Corinthians 1:10 NRSV (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)

**Opening Icebreaker:** What is the funniest sibling rivalry story you can think of to share?

### **Scripture Questions**

**What is the scripture saying?**

- What is going on within the Corinthian Church?

- Who was Apollos? (see Acts 18:24-19:1) ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+18:24; 19:1](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+18:24; 19:1))
- What facts about Jesus are important in a church divided?
- What does Paul do to undercut the divisions within the church?

**How is your life touched?**

- What is a special contribution that a Christian group has made to your life?
- What is the strength you have received from Christ through a group?
- How does the human nature of aggression and sibling rivalry affect a group or church?
- Who is your Father/Mother in the faith?

**What is God's invitation to you?**

- What is Jesus' plan for conflict resolution and how can you implement Jesus' plan in your everyday life?

**What can you pray for?**

Pray that Chilson Hills will be a joyous, faithful, radically honest, praying community of God's resurrection power celebrating the Christ's transforming hope and love in the midst of our individual lives, our families, and our church.